

KONGDOM COME

By Noel Rush

No film in the history of the cinema
has enjoyed greater status
than the 1933 production of King Kong





Absurd, yet compelling, it's one of the most memorable scenes in cinema history: the mighty ape clinging to the top of the skyscraper, snarling his defiance at the world and the swarm of biplanes which buzz around his head like midges, while he holds the terrified blonde in one great paw 1,200 feet above the urban jungle of New York.

The film is of course *King Kong*, and Kong's helpless victim is that beautiful screamer Fay Wray.

This scene, however, lasts a mere five or six minutes out of a total length of 100 minutes – but there is far more to the film than just its climax. Superficially, the idea of a 50-foot ape abducting a human woman seems laughable. But seen under the right circumstances – on a Kong-sized cinema screen, not on television interrupted by chimpanzees selling packets of tea – the 1933 RKO film can still thrill and enthrall anyone between two and 102. Well-constructed and told, competently performed, all the right ingredients were

properly mixed to produce a cinema classic: adventure and amazement, beauty and a beast, humour and sex.

The viewer is never given a chance to disbelieve, as the pace slowly builds up towards Kong's first appearance, 40 minutes into the film. All the wisecracks come early, building up a false atmosphere. No one makes jokes about Kong . . . and not even the audience dares to laugh at him, only with him.

Kong is the hero of the film, not the villain; a real character, he's as playful as a puppy, but as deadly as any wild animal can be. We can see him think, look into his eyes and know that he is more than just the product of a studio special effects team. When he kills a dinosaur, he plays with its jaw as though to bring it back to life so they can fight again; he stares perplexed at his paw after Bruce Cabot stabs at his probing fingers; he tickles Fay Wray's chest to make her squirm; when something is given to him, as the islanders give him the girl, he takes it; and when she is stolen from him, he tries to get her back.

The film starred Robert Armstrong as Carl Denham, Bruce Cabot as Jack Driscoll, as well as Fay Wray playing the part of Ann Darrow. Kong himself was also on the cast list – as *The Eighth Wonder Of The World*. Born in Canada, Fay Wray was in her mid-twenties when she made *King Kong*, and this was destined to be her most famous role. Her first two screen appearances were in 1928 films, one called *Street Of Sin* and the other *The Wedding March*! With other films such as *Dr X*, *The Vampire Bat* and *Mysteries Of The Wax Museum*, her typical role was that of a maiden in distress. She is probably better remembered for her vocal talents than her looks and acting. Talking about her ability in *Kong*, she said: 'I screamed up and down the scale with a wide variety of inflections, and the studio chose the one that produced the most ice up and down the spine.'

At the same time as she made *King Kong*, Fay Wray was also screaming her way through another film called *The Most*

Dangerous Game (or *The Hounds Of Zaroff*, as it was known in Britain). The two films were made simultaneously, but *Zaroff* was released earlier. This was because it took nearly a year to make *Kong* due to the time-consuming special effects. Most of the film's budget of \$650,000 went on these effects, and in comparison *Zaroff* only cost \$200,000 to film. It took almost as long to make *King Kong* as it did to build the other star of the film – the Empire State Building. Started in early 1930, the ESB was opened in May 1931, and was to remain the world's tallest building for over 40 years. Originally it was planned that Kong would play his big scene in a baseball ground, but luckily the Empire State Building made its professional debut in time to prevent this.

Fay Wray plays a girl who is picked up off the streets of New York by the documentary film maker Carl Denham, to go off on a six week voyage and make a film she knows nothing about – the only woman on a ship full of men. In reality when Fay Wray signed for the role she knew little about the picture – except that she was to play opposite 'the tallest leading man in Hollywood'!

Fact and fiction also blend together in the case of the directors of *King Kong*. Merian C Cooper and Ernest B Schoedsack made their reputation with a film called *Grass*, a documentary about a tribe of herdsmen in Persia; this was followed by *Chang*, both a thriller and a documentary which they filmed in Siam. The character of Carl Denham in *King Kong* seems to be a composite of Cooper and Schoedsack; and in keeping with their one word titles, the film was first to be called simply *Kong*. They were going to use a real gorilla for the film, enlarging it through trick photography, filming in Africa and making another part-thriller, part-documentary. But then they teamed up with Willis O'Brien, previously best remembered for his special effects in *The Lost World* . . . and the rest is history.

Or almost. The writing credits for the film

are always listed as follows: story by Edgar Wallace and Merian C Cooper; screenplay by James Creelman (who also wrote *The Hounds Of Zaroff* for the cinema) and Ruth Rose (Schoedsack's wife). Best-selling British author, Edgar Wallace wrote over 150 novels – probably his most famous creations being *Sanders of the River* and *The Four Just Men*. He went to Hollywood to write films, but died of a heart attack followed by pneumonia early in 1932.

He did, however, complete a screenplay for *King Kong* before his death – a script which closely resembles the plot of the film which was finally made, although the heroine is called Shirley, not Ann. Cooper, however, maintains that Wallace contributed nothing to the film, 'not a bloody word' and that he only listed Wallace's name on the credits because he'd promised that he would. Wallace himself, in his January 6, 1932, entry to his book *My Hollywood Diary*, wrote: 'The next month or two are very important to me. If this big film gets over that Cooper is doing, it's going to make a big difference to me, for although I am not responsible for the success of the picture, and really can't be since the ideas were mainly Cooper's, I shall get all the credit for authorship and invention which rightly belongs to him.'

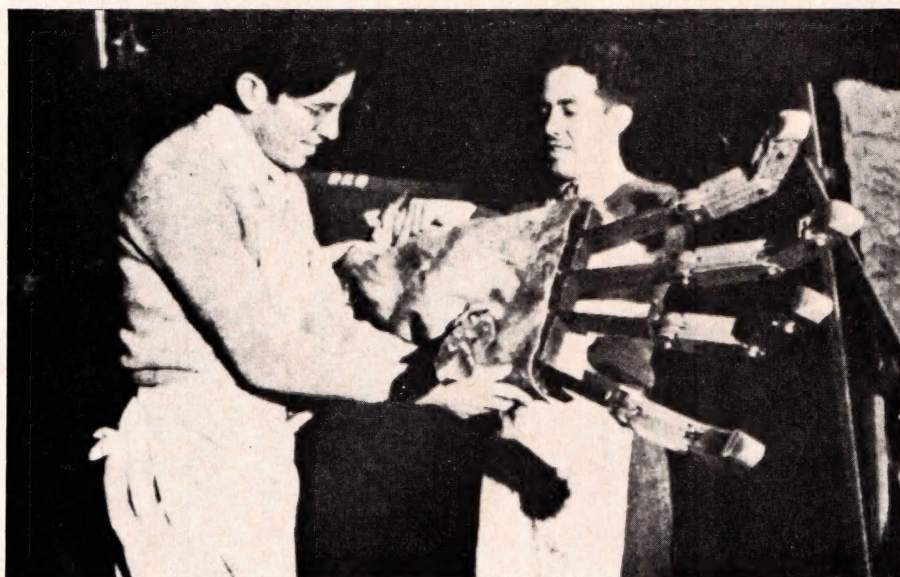
Yet in 1927 a book of Wallace's called *The Avenger* had an ape which chased fainting women, and climbed up the outside of buildings, Kong-style! So possibly Cooper was inspired by Wallace without either of them knowing it.

The plot of *King Kong*, however, more closely resembles that of Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* than anything else; and it was the film version of this on which O'Brien first used the special effects which he perfected for *Kong*. *The Lost World*, like *Kong*, contained prehistoric monsters battling it out in an unexplored land; one of these, a brontosaurus, is brought back to civilisation (London, in this case), where it breaks free and wrecks part of the city, and is finally seen swimming down the Thames, out to sea. Therefore it can rightly be said that the creator of Sherlock Holmes also played a part in the invention of yet another world-famous character – *Kong*.

The film starts on board a ship, with film maker and explorer Carl Denham saying that he must find a girl to star in his film before they sail. 'The public, bless 'em, must have a pretty face to look at,' he insists.

He discovers his leading lady in Depression New York, trying to steal some fruit from a stall. As the film is in black and white, it's difficult to tell if it is an orange or a more symbolic apple that she is after. But it is long after the ship has set sail, Denham reveals their destination: an unknown island south-west of Sumatra. To pass the time he films Ann Darrow/Fay Wray as, dressed in pure white robes, she practises screaming at the sight of some imaginary horror. Jack Driscoll wonders aloud: 'What's he think she's really going to see?' Arriving at Skull Island, the crew find a massive wall, dividing the island in half,

turn to page 80



The Delgado brothers construct the skeleton of a giant paw for the original *King Kong*.

Kongdom Come

continued from page 78

and containing an enormous gate. 'Might almost be Egyptian,' says the captain, while Ann asks: 'Who do you suppose could have built it?' The answer, in fact, is the props department, the gate being a left over set from *King Of Kings*. They come across a native village where islanders are involved in a ritual dance, dressed as apes and chanting: 'Kong! Kong!' But any hostility melts away when they notice Ann.

'Look at the golden woman,' translates the captain. 'Yeah,' agrees Denham, 'blondes are scarce around here.' The chief offers to trade six of his women for Ann, the witch doctor saying she'll make a gift for Kong. Denham tells Ann to smile and keep her chin up, then they retreat to the ship, trying to look casual. That night Ann and Driscoll, the first mate, are together on deck and declare their love for each other. A few minutes later Ann is abducted by the natives, quickly led through the giant wall and lashed between two sturdy upright poles as a 'bride of Kong'.

Kong comes crashing through the trees, stares at the tiny sacrifice the islanders have left him, delicately frees the screaming Ann from her bonds and carries her off into the jungle – pursued by Denham, Driscoll and a dozen sailors. It turns out that Kong isn't the only giant on the island; it's full of prehistoric monsters. The men kill a stegosaurus ('Something from the dinosaur family,' explains Denham), but then their raft is attacked by a plesiosaur (which we

are perhaps more familiar with as the Loch Ness Monster), which also chews up a few of the crew. Kong finishes off most of the others by shaking them from a log into a deep ravine. Only Denham and Driscoll escape, the former going for more help while the latter follows Kong and his bride. Kong goes on to fight and kill a tyrannosaurus rex, a giant water snake and a pterodactyl – all of whom regard the girl as a tasty morsel, which indeed she is. It is while Kong pulls the wings off the pterodactyl, like a child pulling apart a butterfly, that Driscoll appears and rescues Ann. Finally they reach the village, Driscoll wants to take the girl back to the ship, but Denham talks about capturing Kong: 'We've got something he wants'

Kong, however, is already on his way. He batters through the wall, wrecking huts, snarling and roaring, till Denham knocks him out with a gas bomb.

The next scene is in New York – and this is four-fifths of the way through the film – where Kong is on display in a theatre as 'The Eighth Wonder Of The World'. The audience files in, unsure of exactly what it is they are going to see. One woman complains that she can't sit so close to the screen, but is told that there isn't a film. But, she protests, doesn't Carl Denham make films about 'those darling monkeys'? 'This is more in the nature of a personal appearance,' the usher tells her.

What they see, when the curtains are drawn back, is Kong, tied to a post, arms outspread as though crucified – shackled in

almost the same way that the islanders bound Ann Darrow. Driscoll and Ann are to marry the next day, but first Denham exhibits the girl on stage in front of Kong. As the photographers' bulbs flash, Kong roars and tears at his chains. Denham shouts that the creature thinks the photographers are attacking the blonde, trying to make them stop. They don't. Kong bursts free. Driscoll and Ann run out of the side door, pursued by Kong.

While Kong carries out some demolition work and munches on a passing pedestrian, Ann and Driscoll flee to their hotel. Kong climbs up the side of the hotel, reaching in one room to pluck a woman from her bed. But it's the wrong woman, a brunette, and he casually drops her hundreds of feet to the street below. Then he finds Ann's room, brushes Driscoll aside with his paw, and grabs the fainted girl.

Just as on his island Kong lived on the highest mountain, he now makes for the tallest point in the city. Meanwhile in police headquarters, Denham and Driscoll hear on the radio that *Kong is climbing the Empire State Building; he is still carrying Ann Darrow*. 'Airplanes,' suggests Driscoll. 'If he should put Ann down and they can fly close enough to pick him off without hitting her...' A chorus of newspaper men chants: 'Oh boy, what a story!'

Kong is clinging to the airship mooring mast when the four biplanes arrive, and he puts down the blonde on a ledge above the building's observatory so he can use both arms to beat at his massive chest, issuing his challenge. The planes circle, bullets pumping into him. Kong examines the blood on his chest with his paw, staring at it with a bewildered expression. But the aerial battle isn't all one-sided, and Kong manages to grab the wing tip of one of his assailants which ventures too close, and the plane spins down in flames. The three other airgunners keep up their fusillade, and Kong staggers, rapidly weakening.

He picks up his reluctant partner in elopement one last time, looks at her, then gently places her back on the ledge. The planes close in for the kill, and Kong clutches at his throat as he is hit, letting go his grip on the mast. He totters backwards, sways, then falls.

With Kong lying dead in the street, the police lieutenant says: 'Well, Denham, the airplanes got him.' To which Denham replies: 'Oh, no, it wasn't the airplanes. It was beauty killed the beast.'

The success of *King Kong* inevitably led to *Son of Kong*, a year later. But Kong Junior was a puny specimen, only 20-feet high and also an albino. Because of the cost of Kong's attempt to flatten New York, Carl Denham returns to Skull Island, where he rescues mini-Kong from quicksand. Son becomes a friend for life, which isn't very long because an earthquake destroys the island. Not, however, before Denham finds some buried treasure, and the kind Kong holds Denham, his party (including Helen Mack, who is only a brunette) and the treasure above the water until they are rescued – though Kong himself dies.

turn to page 82



One of the film's most famous sequences: Kong and a tyrannosaurus rex fight to the death.

Kongdom Come

continued from page 80

The *King Kong* team of Cooper, Schoedsack and O'Brien finished their giant ape trilogy in 1949 with *Mighty Joe Young*. Carl Denham makes it three in a row when he finds his last titan in Africa, the pet of blonde Terry Moore who has had him ever since he was merely Tiny Joe Young. Joe is more fortunate than his predecessors in that he's still alive by the time the film finishes – having shown he's a nice chap saving some kids from a burning orphanage. It was for this film that O'Brien finally won his well-deserved special effects Oscar. Using the same basic process of stop-frame photography which he was to perfect for *King Kong*, O'Brien's first animation sequence was made using clay models of two boxers. After *The Lost World*, O'Brien was working on a project of his own called *Creation*; and it was the work he had done on this proposed film which brought him directly to Cooper's attention, in his capacity as executive assistant to David O Selznick, the production chief.

King Kong as he appears on screen is O'Brien's creation, and but for O'Brien the film might never have been made. Working in his garage, O'Brien made a sample reel of animated film – the episodes in which Kong shakes the sailors from the log, hurling them to their deaths, and then has a freestyle wrestling match with the tyrannosaur. Impressed with the results, the film studio gave Cooper the go-ahead for full production.

Twenty-seven models were used, from 16-inch tall figures to full-sized Kong parts: head and shoulders for chewing people, a foot for squashing more people, and an arm for carrying blondes. Stop-frame photography formed the basis for all the effects: shooting one frame of the film, moving the model slightly, then shooting

another frame, to give the illusion of movement when the reel was projected at proper speed. The process was very slow, particularly when it is remembered that there are 24 frames to every second of film, and that the model might have to be moved only a sixteenth of an inch at a time. A half minute sequence in which Kong tears off Fay Wray's clothes took a full 24 hours to film. So life-like were the effects – particularly such details as the wind ruffling Kong's fur, and his almost human facial expressions – that there was a legend that Kong was a full-sized robotic ape, with several men inside to pull the strings from within. O'Brien drew the original sketches, but the models were made by two brothers named Delgado: steel skeletons, jointed limbs, rubber 'muscles', covered in rabbit fur.

Probably the most famous illustration of Kong, with him towering above the skyscrapers of New York, does not come from the film at all but was a publicity montage – giving the impression that Kong was half a mile high, and Fay Wray at least 250 feet tall! For the film, all of Kong's dimensions were carefully calculated and scaled down. He was meant to be 50 feet tall, with an armspan of 75 feet; and his six feet wide mouth was full of 14-inch high teeth.

It was the expert mixture of a whole box of special effects trickery which made *King Kong* such a success: rear projection and glass shots, matting and optical wizardry, as well as stop-frame. Besides models of Kong and the dinosaurs, tiny models of people were also used at some stages. Back projection – filming people against another film shown on a screen, to give the illusion that they are in some exotic locale – was adapted so that a tiny screen showing the 'live' action was projected as the background to the miniature model sets. This was the first time this was ever done.

The scene in which Fay Wray is stripped

combined many of these techniques. First, the actress was filmed in the grasp of the full-sized Kong hand – and her clothes were yanked off by wires! Then this enormous hand was 'matted' up against a 16-inch body, intercut with shots of a two-inch blonde doll wriggling in the model's paw, against a 'glass shot' background – a jungle previously filmed on the same frames, but but only exposing the section of film surrounding the action. And after all this effort, the scene was cut from the final version because it was too blatantly erotic for 1933; instead the audience had to make do with the undisguised sexual symbolism. It's no accident that the creators of *King Kong* produced such a powerful sexual allegory: the story of a beautiful damsel in distress, her chastity threatened by such a potent abductor. In the film Fay Wray was clad in a virginal white dress – before it became tattered and torn, or soaking wet and skin tight. The sketches originally made to outline the plot are more explicit than any scenes in the film, and publicity shots of Fay Wray show her provocatively posed and more scantily clad than she ever appeared on screen. Preliminary drawings show the blonde with her clothing so dishevelled that one breast is naked – a regrettable impossibility at that time.

A number of scenes filmed were later censored at various times. The most famous deletion was, as mentioned, the scene where Kong strips Fay Wray. Soon after he first lays his paws on the girl, Kong fondles her with his finger, removes her dress and sniffs at the female scent on his claws. The scene was cut from almost every print before release. What is left is the scene on the mountain top where Kong again examines his captive, poking her gently with his claws as though tickling her. The censored scene must also have shown the girl managing to get back inside her dress, and so protect her modesty; but by now her shoulder is bare, the dress in shreds, her bra strap gone. Kong might have carried his explorations even further, but this is the point where the pterodactyl attacks and while Kong is diverted, Driscoll and the girl escape.

King Kong was slashed to pieces in Nazi Germany, eliminating all the scenes where Kong touches the girl (which doesn't leave much); physical contact between the blonde Aryan girl and the racially impure Kong was too obscene.

Further cuts were made when the film was reissued in 1938, to bring it in line with the strict new Production Code. It was further mutilated in 1942 and 1952, cutting down the length of the film so that more ice creams could be sold during the longer interval between pictures. These missing minutes reduced the violence, showing that Kong was much better behaved than he was originally. He no longer crunched up harmless natives or threw innocent women from great heights.

Most of these deletions have fortunately been restored intact for later re-releases of *King Kong*, but it's a pity about that scene where he strips off his beautiful captive's clothes . . .



A bird in both hands. Kong grasping a pterodactyl and a Fay Wray look-alike doll.